

VZCZCXRO0212
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #0333/01 0800935
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 200935Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5485
INFO RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0481
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8868
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1532
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6298
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2627
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2250
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000333

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STATE FOR DRL/IRF WARREN COFSKY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF CASC AG

SUBJECT: JUST IN TIME FOR EASTER: TROUBLE WITH CHRISTIANS

REF: A. ALGIERS 76

1B. ALGIERS 133

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The controversy surrounding Christians and alleged Evangelical Christian proselytizing in Algeria continues (refs A, B). In late February Hugh Johnson, a retired American Methodist minister who has lived and worked in Algeria for 45 years, was suddenly ordered to leave the country with no official reason given for his removal. Johnson was scheduled to leave Algeria March 10, but a last-minute court decision has allowed him to stay temporarily. March has also brought reports of church closings, at least some of which appear to be accurate. Separately, a schism is emerging among the various Protestant factions in Algeria, with the Evangelicals reportedly seeking to assert domination over more mainstream Protestants. Despite the tiny size of the Christian community in Algeria, accusations of Christian proselytizing have generated disproportionate media attention in a country that is 99 percent Muslim. END SUMMARY.

THE CASE OF HUGH JOHNSON

12. (C) Hugh Johnson, a retired American Methodist minister who has lived and worked in Algeria since 1963, gave us a detailed read-out of his situation on March 9. Johnson told us that he was in Oran on February 23 when Roger Correvon, pastor of the Protestant Church of Algiers, called him to say that he had received a summons to appear at the police station. Johnson flew to Algiers, appeared at the police station and was told that, effective February 25, he had two weeks to leave the country. No reason for the decision was given. According to Johnson, the police told him that they hoped he would file an appeal, since he had lived here for so long. It would be "a pity," they said, for him to leave at this point. Johnson wrote a letter to the Ministry of Religious Affairs requesting an explanation, which he sent via Catholic Archbishop Henri Teissier, but has not yet received a response or any official reason for why he was ordered to leave.

13. (C) Johnson told us that he had read in the press that the Ministry of Religious Affairs said that the decision to remove him came from the Interior ministry. According to press reports, Johnson continued, he had been asked to leave

the country because he was officially retired, without a job, and with no visible means of support in Algeria. Johnson believes that this was a smokescreen because, according to him, there are other retired people living here who have not been told to leave. Johnson also said he believes he is a pawn in a political campaign waged by President Bouteflika to appeal to more Islamic elements in society.

¶4. (C) Johnson was notified late on March 10 that he had been permitted to remain in Algeria, at least temporarily. He explained to us on March 11 that the Constitutional Court had canceled the order removing him from the country. According to Johnson, the Court's justification was that it was "dismissing an arbitrary action." Johnson, who did not appear before the Court, told us that the Court canceled the removal order because it found no legal basis for it in Algerian law. Johnson also told us that he is waiting both for written confirmation of the new ruling and for new documents that will clarify how long he is allowed to stay in Algeria. Until these matters are resolved, he added, he intends to confine himself to the grounds of the Protestant Church of Algiers. On March 15, Roger Correvon informed us that Johnson's case was being considered by the Supreme Court, and as of March 19 Johnson was still in Algiers awaiting a final decision. (Septel details our discussion with the MFA about Johnson.)

EVANGELICALS: VICTIMS OR LAW BREAKERS?

¶5. (C) Press reports over the last month have featured prominently the closing of Protestant churches in Algeria. We have been unable to verify how many churches may have been

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closed, and cannot discount the possibility that some of the reports are part of a press frenzy directed against the Christian minority generally, and Evangelical Protestants in particular. Correvon told us March 9 that the Algerian government had closed nine Protestant churches in the past two months. This included the largest Protestant church in the country, located in Tizi Ouzou, which boasted 600 members and 300 worshipers at each service. One of the nine churches was closed the day of our meeting, Correvon added. Correvon also told us that all of the churches that were closed have existed since 2000, were Evangelical in orientation, and were based in the mountainous Kabylie region east of Algiers. Moreover, he conceded, the churches had never operated legally nor tried to, either before or after the 2006 issuance of Ordinance 06-03, which set strict parameters for non-Muslim worship.

¶6. (U) According to the March 12 edition of the Arabic-language daily Echourouk el-Youmi, "Protestant websites" said that ten churches had received notification from the police that they should stop their religious activities. The article also stated that the same notice was sent to two "associations" that had places of worship operating in the Kabylie region. The article provided neither the websites nor the names of the associations.

¶7. (C) The March 19 edition of the Arabic-language daily El Khabar reported that Algerian security services prevented eight foreign Christians en route to a Christian conference in the province of Tizi Ouzou from entering the province. The article also stated that the eight were detained at a checkpoint in Tad-Mayet for several hours. (Note: In a March 19 phone conversation, Roger Correvon told us that the eight individuals were French and likely entered Algeria on tourist passports. End Note.) In the same article, Mustapha Krim, the head of the Protestant Church of Algeria, was quoted as calling the actions taken concerning the foreign Christians as a "provocation." He also maintained, according to the article, that security forces had not closed any churches in Tizi Ouzou. The article continued with a statement by Religious Affairs Minister Bouabdallah

Ghalmallah that the government was following the law and was not putting pressure on non-Muslim worship. Ghalmallah is also reported to have said that the two closed churches in Tizi Ouzou have to submit requests to the appropriate wali (governor) if they want to be legally recognized.

TROUBLE IN THE FOLD

¶8. (C) Correvon told us that any problems he was having within his religious community were "internal" rather than with the Algerian government. He noted that the Protestant Church of Algeria (PCA), an umbrella organization the government deals with, is now overwhelmingly populated by Evangelical Christians. (Note: The PCA is headed by Mustapha Krim. Correvon's Protestant Church of Algiers is a member of the PCA. End note.) Correvon confirmed the existence of a split within the PCA's 32 member churches between the five mainline Protestant churches and 27 Evangelical churches. According to Correvon, the Evangelicals want the PCA to be an Evangelical movement and want to push traditional Protestant members out. Correvon maintained that Algerian Evangelicals want to distance themselves from foreign Christian elements. He also told us that foreign involvement in the Protestant churches is not significant, though the mainline churches continue to depend on outside sources for funding.

¶9. (C) Correvon posited that Algerian Evangelicals may want to take control of the PCA and move their base to Algiers. If they do that and try to assume formal control of the PCA buildings, he said, there will be an additional problem. The church buildings have for years been the property of the Reformed Church of France. According to Correvon, the Reformed Church of France was legally recognized here but has long since left. Correvon believes that, for the time being, the Algerian government has not focused on this legal complication.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) Johnson's case comes at a time of print media attention to Christians and alleged Christian proselytizing that is completely disproportionate to the size of the actual Christian population. In one example of the rhetoric, on February 4 Abderrahmane Chibane, president of the Algerian Muslim Scholars Association, described Christian proselytizing in Algeria as an "act of aggression" and said that it was tearing apart the country's "social fabric." We have had limited contact with representatives of the Evangelical movement due to our inability to travel into the Kabylie region. However, our contacts with non-Evangelical Protestants and the Catholic Church here lead us to believe that the Evangelicals have assumed a higher profile than other Christians in Algeria and are more defiant, if not deliberately confrontational in skirting Algerian law. This has roiled the government to an extent that attention to the issue is not likely to fade quickly.

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